

U.S. man convicted of going to Moldova to have sex

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By MARYCLAIRE DALE

Associated Press Writer

PHILADELPHIA. A wealthy motel owner from New Jersey was convicted Friday of traveling to eastern Europe to sexually assault impoverished boys in exchange for money and gifts. Anthony Mark Bianchi, 44, was found guilty of virtually all the charges he faced in federal court. Bianchi was convicted of having sex with or attempting to have sex with four boys on foreign soil, including in the isolated Moldovan village of Trebujeni, in exchange for money, food, liquor, trips and gifts.

During the three-week trial, most of which was heard through translators, several Moldovan boys testified that Bianchi assaulted them in small boarding houses where he stayed during his trips. Mark Geragos, the high-profile lawyer representing Bianchi, said his client enjoyed traveling to offbeat destinations and had no ulterior motives for giving the boys gifts. He said prosecutors had insufficient evidence to support their allegations. He also told jurors that young witnesses gave conflicting statements or were "lying through their teeth" on the stand. Bianchi's case is among more than 50 that have been brought under a largely untested 2003 U.S. law, known as the Protect Act, designed to thwart "sex tourism" by trying suspected overseas child predators in U.S. courts. About 50 people, including Bianchi, have been charged to date under the law. About 30 of the defendants have been convicted. The logistics of bringing victims and witnesses to a U.S. courthouse raises constitutional issues that legal scholars expect will reach the U.S. Supreme Court.